

Some Less Known Aspects of History of Ensing of Polish Sea Going Vessels 1863-1919

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There are reasons for examining the story of the Polish flag in the period mentioned in the title, because its appearance differs from ensings used in former periods of Polish history, that is until 1795 when Poland was completely partitioned between three neighbouring powers (Fig. 1).

Though the so called "Polish Kingdom" which came into existence being at the Vienna Congress in 1815 had its own army and autonomous government, it was not completely independent, it lost the majority of its territory. Poland's territory adjacent to the coastline was annexed by the Kingdom of Prussia, which also occupied Poland's only port, Gdansk. Gdansk the first port of the Commonwealth - the official name of the country at that time was "commonwealth" - enjoyed a lot of king's privileges was a rich town. After having been annexed by Prussia, it degenerated into town of secondary importance. The port deprived of the Polish agricultural background by the Prussian customs fell into a decline. (1)

The story of the Polish ensing begins at the time of the national Insurrection, which broke out in November 1830. At this time the Polish Parliament voted that white and red were to be Polish national colours. This step was felt necessary so as to enable the army and a highly patriotic population to wear bows (Fig. 2) and ensings of national colours.

Since the vote of 7 February 1831, red and white have been the colours of which the Polish national flag is composed.

Prior to this decision, and in particular in the days of the old Polish kingdom, the same colours appeared only on the official coat of arms of the king, which was in turn featured on shields and national banner (Fig. 3).

Polish national colours were associated with the schooner "Symmetry" which carried arms for the insurgents, and sailed from London under the British colours in 1831. Before unloading the cargo, the white-and-red flag, diagonally composed, was supposed to be hoisted on the main mast top. On the shore they were supposed to signal with a white-and-red flag horizontally composed. The cargo was not removed because of lack of synchronization. The flags used by both sides were not in the nature of ensings, though they featured Polish national colours; they were signal flags (Fig. 4).

During the Insurrection, and after its fall, demonstrations in favour of Poland, inspired by democratic circles, took place in the different countries of Europe. For instance, in May 1832, German liberals fixed flags with Polish national colours on the tower of Kästenburg Castle in Rhineland. In August 1832, at a meeting held in London, Polish colours were raised; the flag bore the inscription: "For Your Freedom and Ours".

During the next Polish insurrection which broke out in January 1863, the national white-and-red flag was not yet widely used on land but a national colours of the navy came into existence. Commander Wladyslaw Zbyszewsk was trying to organize a Polish fleet. In February 1864 the ship "Princess" sailed from England wearing the British flag. After

she had reached the Mediterranean Sea, she was to raise a Polish flag -ensing- and change her name to "Kosciuszko". Following the Russian diplomatic pressure, the ship was interned at Malaga and thus was prevented from taking part in the insurrection. Another ship "Ward Jackson", carrying volunteers and arms, was placed under command of colonel Teofil Lapinski, sailed from England to the Lithuanian shore. It probably sailed under the British ensing, though we can not exclude the possibility that, it also had a flag with the Polish eagle.

The original of the flag worn by the ship "Princess" was lost, but its description remained, i.e. "The flag of Polish ships is of two colours, white and amarantine, with an official coat of arms as used on the seals (Fig. 5). of National Government. The emblem (i.e. jack) -a white arm carrying the sword, on the amarantine".

When the Polish State had been reconstructed after the first World War, the flag fixed in 1863 was used as a pattern for the Polish merchant fleet (Fig. 6).

The act of Parliament of the first of August 1919 laid down the desings of Polish national flag: two horizontal stripes, the upper white, and the lower red. The flag for inland waterways navigation had, in addition, the national emblem the white eagle, in the middle of the upper strip (Fig. 7).

Why was there this difference between flags for the two kinds of navigation? The official transcripts of the relevant Parliament -Seym- discussions do not mention the matter. But a very interesting document, not yet published, and dating from the spring 1919, the time when the desing of the Polish flags were prepared, was found by Stefan K. Kuczynski in the State Archives -New Acts-: This document shows the draft desing of the Polish flag for the sea-going vessels with the national emblem on a red oval fixed in the upper strip.

Still the question remains. Was the principle of the 1863 pattern followed? What reasons had commander Zbyszewski of the ship "Princess". to agree to a flag with an emblem in the middle of the white strip?. No other navigational white-and-red flag existed.

To understand this particular feature of the desing of the Polish flag let us examine similar situations occurring in the other countries. As a rule it is not necessary to differentiate by the ensings the inland and the sea-going navigation ships -there are differences in the construction of ships and so in the navigation.

The only country where inland navigation has its own special flag is Luxemburg. The barges and vessels wear flags with coat of arms. This was necessary because of the similarity between the Dutch flag and that of Luxemburg. The difference lies in the shade of blue of the lower stripe. Since the flags are flown by sea going vessels for 24 hours a day, the colours are bleached by sea water and sunshine and so this difference would be difficult to be seen. The Dutch national flag has been used as an ensing since the first part of seventeenth century in the present day colours. The fleet of Luxemburg which is much smaller, and only inland, had to adopt another flag, as an ensing (Fig. 8).

Another country which had troubles with its flags is Greece. In Greece the difference concerns flags used on land and those used at sea (Fig. 9).

In Italy since the fall of the monarchy and the stablishment of the

Republic, the ensing has been showing, in the middle of the white stripe an emblem composed of the coat of arms of four towns merchant republics in the old days -i.e. Venice, Genoa, Pisa and Amalfi-. It seems that the emblem has been introduced in order to distinguish the Italian from Mexican ensing. The latter has got no emblem though such is marked on the national flag used in land (Fig. 10).

It may also be said that the differences between flags of the same country have arisen from need the earmark boats which have a special task, such as official and inspection boats, police and maintenance boats, etc.. This is a feature widely known throughout the world as borne out by example of the "defaced" British flag and particular official ensings in a number of countries (Fig. 11)

However nowhere does there exist an artificial difference in flags between sea fleet and the rest of Polish National fleet. What was the reason for fixing a different flag for the sea going ships?

It could not have been the matter of national prestige. The flag already had the national red-and-white colours and the addition of the national emblem in the same colours might easily be regarded as repetitions. The distinction does not seem to be needed. Furthermore, there have been no precedents in other countries.

The difference between Polish national flag and those of Indonesia and Monaco is so distinctive that the problem did not lie in the difference between the red and white flag, specially as in 1919 only the flag of Monaco existed as a national flag.

Some distinguishing feature of the flag of Polish navy and sea merchant fleet was necessary -but what?.

We will see the explanation at once if we take into consideration the fact that in the 19th and 20th centuries white-and-red colours were widely used by piloting boats, on the Baltic and North Sea, and even in ports of countries situated far away from Poland. Norie and Hobbs 1848 speak of white-and-red flag as of a "Pilot Flag" (Fig. 12). Because of the fact that Great Britain had a magnificent fleet and conducted its business all over the world, this custom was known in countries far away from England. The German "Flaggenbuch der Deutschen Kriegsmarine" published in the period between the two wars for the last time in 1939 mentions ten white-and-red flags used as pilot flags, and not only in countries close to Great Britain like Ireland, Norway or Denmark, but also in the Far East: China, Japan, Manchuria, Iraq, Tonga and Turkey. The last mentioned has additionally a golden yellow anchor on the white-and-red flag.

So the problem was to distinguish the national ensing of the Polish Republic, resurrected after 123 years, from the ordinary signalling flag announcing the presence of pilots on the boats or pilots stations.

We will not deal with flags calling the pilot the so called "Lotsenrufsignal" which had a different form; they have been replaced by a signal from the International Code of Signals. For example boats piloting the Thames Estuary or the roadsteads of big British harbours, wore only this white-and-red piloting flag in a most noticeable place. The ensing is often placed there. "The Pilotage Act" of 1913 decided that this white-and-red flag should be hoisted "in the most conspicuous place".

In painting of the pilot boat "George Holt" going to meet a big ship in the port of Liverpool, a red-and-white flag is clearly displayed

(Fig. 13).

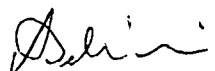
It may be added that certain circumstances special features might have been introduced in national flags and ensings. For instance during the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, a prince's crown was added to the flag of Liechtenstein, so as to make distinct from the flag of Haiti (Fig. 14). The following year this change was officially confirmed.

In 1935, the Soviet Union altered the ensing of its navy, because it resembled the flag of Japanese navy.

Since the 1st October 1959 the flags of the Federal Republic of Germany and of the German Democratic Republic had been different.

But with the exception of Poland, no country has introduced a distinction between the sea faring merchant marine on the one hand, and the inland waterways fleet, on the other.

It may be concluded that the flag of the sea going boats and ships of the Republic of Poland was fixed so as to make it clearly different from the pilot flag of many countries.



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Fig.1. The three rulers are dividing Poland among themselves



Fig.2. White and red
Polish national bow

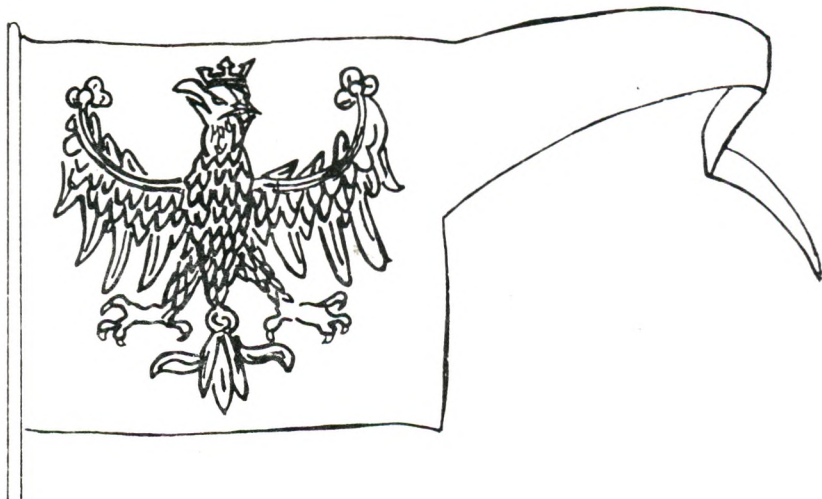


Fig.3. The national banner from the Jegiellonian period.



Fig.4. Schooner "Symmetry" has hoisted a red and white, diagonally composed signal flag



Fig.5. The official seal, from the period of the 1863 insurrection

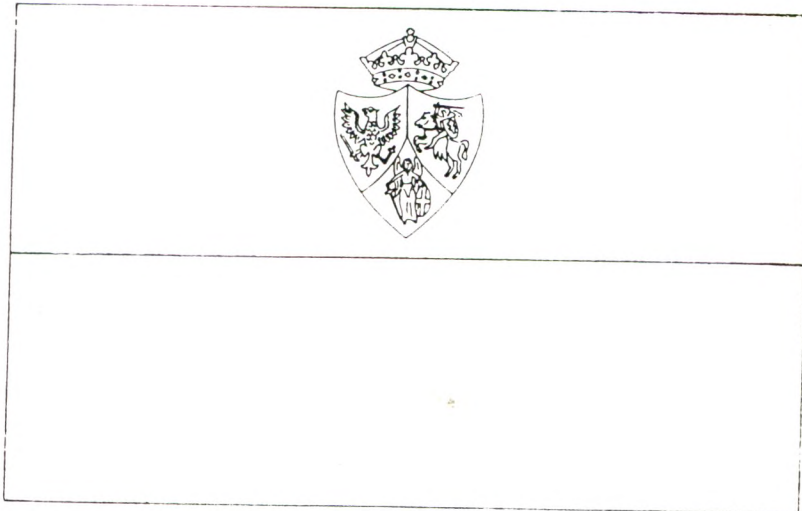


Fig.6. The Polish national ensign of 1863

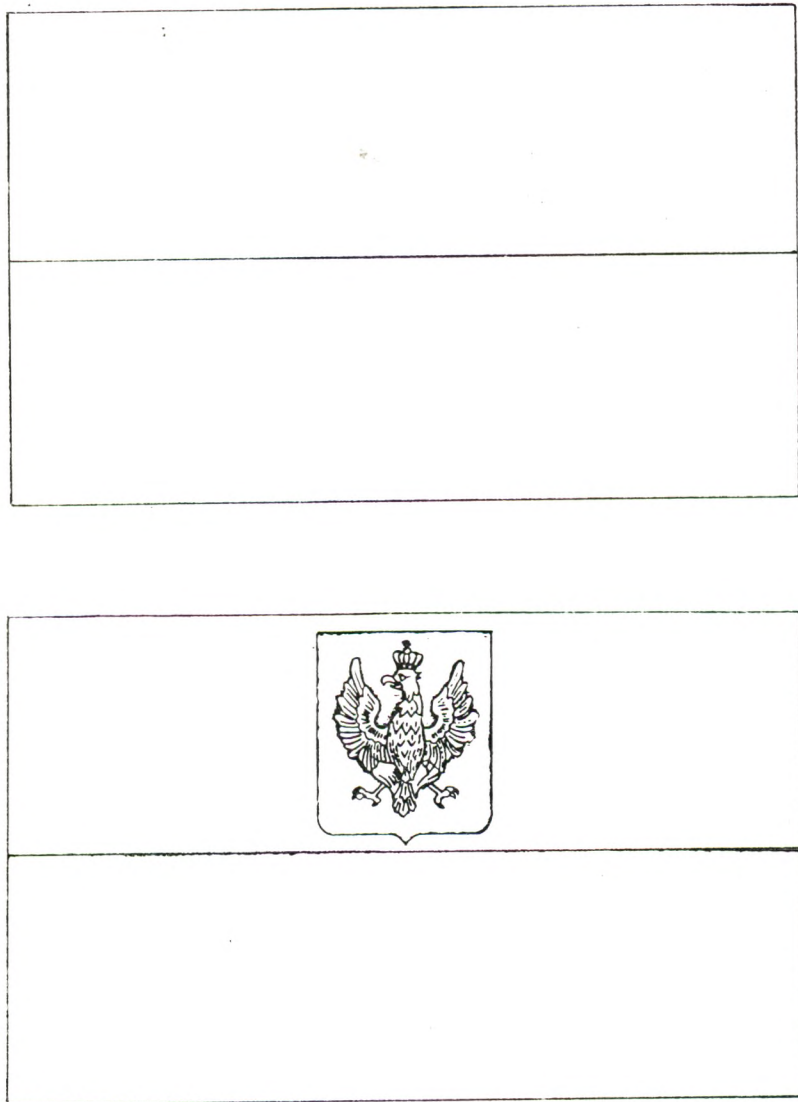


Fig.7. The Polish national white and red ensigns of 1919,
for inland navigation and for the sea going vessels

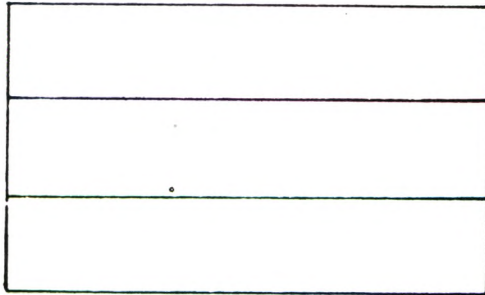
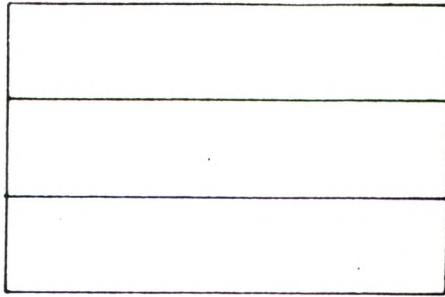


Fig. 8. Flags of the Netherlands and Luxembourg
a. Dutch ensign, b. national flag of Luxembourg, c. ensign used on river barges of Luxembourg

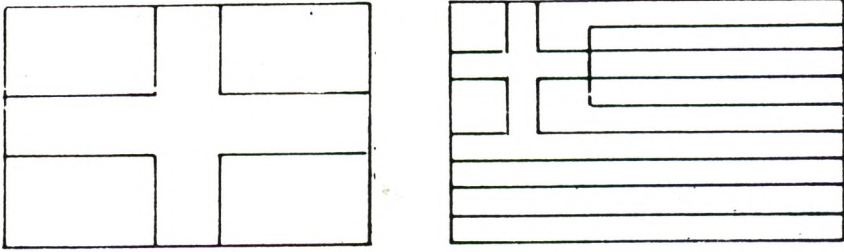


Fig.9. Flags of Greece
 a. national flag used on land, b. national flag used at sea

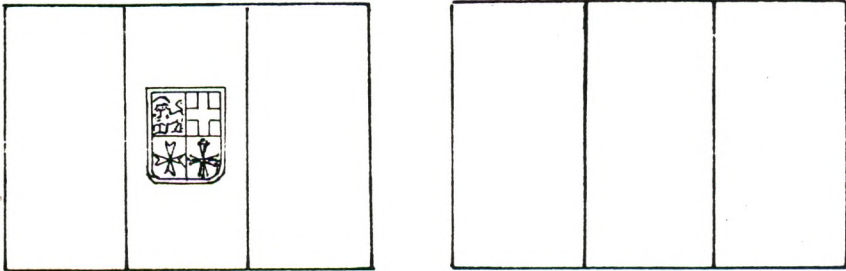


Fig.10. Italian ensign adopted after 2nd world war and Mexican ensign of that time

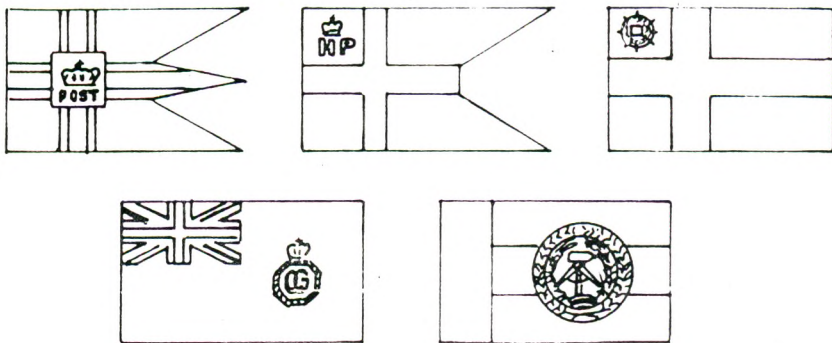


Fig.11. Special ensigns of several countries

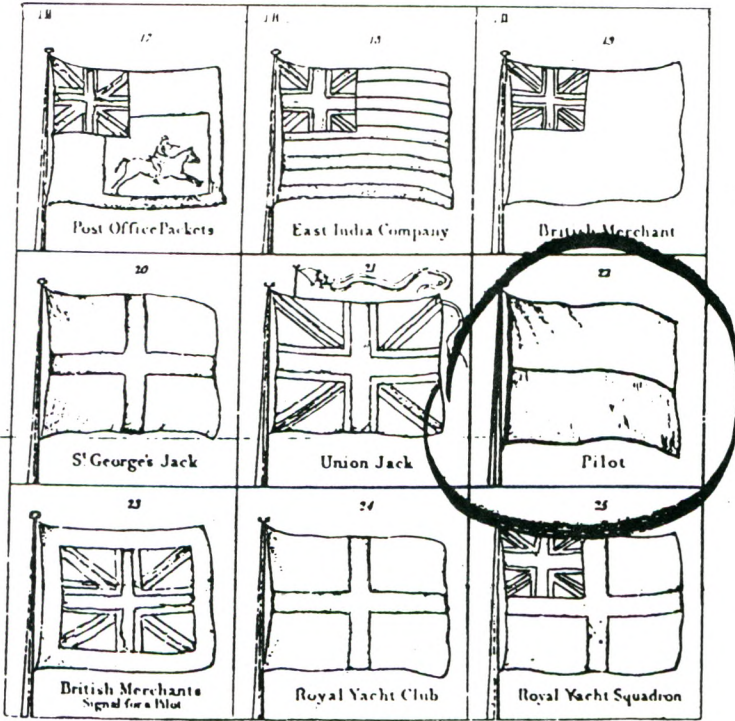


Fig.12. British flag for pilot boats /Norie and Hobbs/

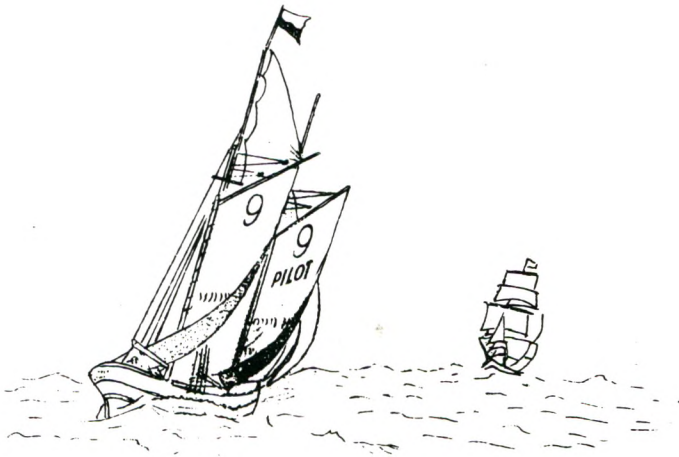


Fig.13. The Liverpool pilot schooner "George Holt"
wears the white-and-red flag.

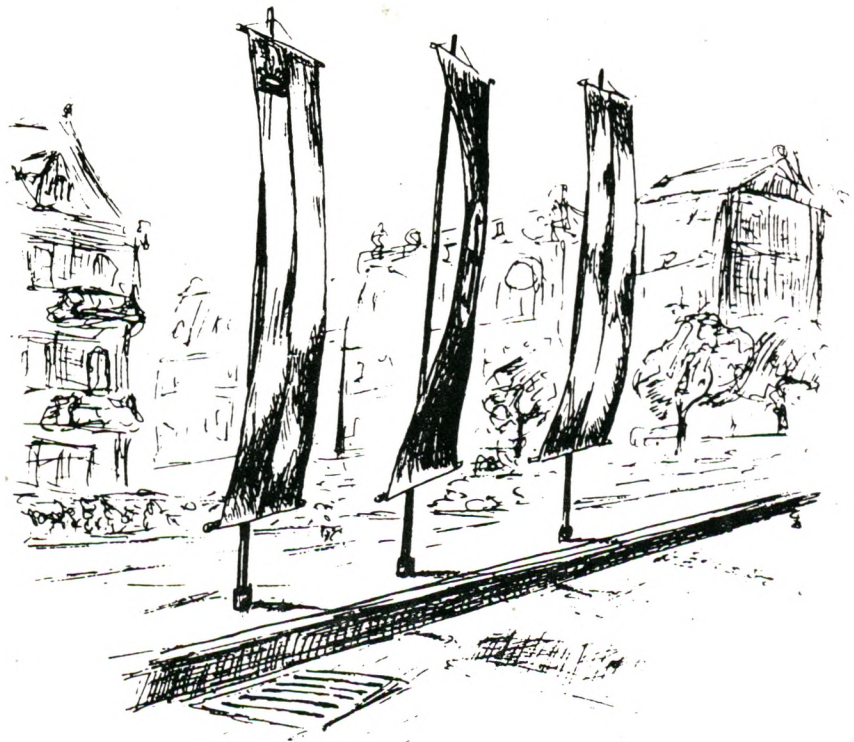


Fig.14. The flag decoration of Berlin's streets during 1936 Olympic Games. Prince's crown distinguishes Lichtenstein's flag from that of Haiti